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NURISTAN: "THE LAND OF LIGHT" SEEN DARKLY[1]

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The approximately 15 million inhabitants of Afghanistan constitute a plethora of ethnic groups, physical types, and languages, but basically all subscribe to one religion, Islam[2] (see Map 1). About 80 per cent of the Afghans are Hanafi Sunni, the rest primarily Ithna 'Ashariya (Imami Shi'a) or Isma'iliya Shi'a.[3] The ethnic and linguistic diversity of Afghanistan, far from being unique, is the dominant pattern in the developing world of Afro-Asia, and in parts of Latin America. One of the more interesting groups in Afghanistan from the anthropological point of view is found in mountainous Nuristan, a zone of relative inaccessibility when compared to the rest of the country. Though remote Nuristan has contacts, peaceful or otherwise, with neighboring peoples. Technically, even avoidance can be considered a form of contact.

I have spent six different research periods in Nuristan or on its fringes: Panjsher Valley (1950); Alishang-Alingar Valleys (1959); Darra-i-Nur (1960); Landai Sin (also Landay Sind) and Bashgul Valley to Bargamatal, and Pech Valley to Supregul and Wama (1963); Kruen (1965); Badakhshan and Wakhan Corridor (1966). Rather than try to cover the individual ethnographic patterns of the groups visited, I shall give a general cultural outline with further emphasis on pre-Muslim religious vestiges, particularly in Wama, Bargamatal, and Kruen, one of the higher villages in Nuristan that was among the last to fall to the Muslim armies of Abdur Rahman Khan during his successful 1895-96 invasion of Kafiristan. The people were known as Kafir, from the Arabic (plural, Kuffar), generally meaning "infidel." About 1,400 of the 3,000 Chitrali (Pakistan) "Kalash Kafir" actually still practice the old religion;[4] the rest have been converted to Islam.

Nearly 60,000 Nuristani[5] live in eastern Afghanistan, and slough over into Pakistani Chitral (See map 2). Nuristani geography consists of five major north-south, rugged, narrow mountain valleys (Bashgul-Landai Sin-Kunar complex; Waigul; Pech-Parun-Kantiwa; Alingar-Kulam; Darra-yi-Nur).

The forests of Nuristan, the most extensive in Afghanistan, include walnut, mulberry, apricot, apple, wild olive, and holly oak in the lower altitudes and up to 9,000 feet in some areas; Asian pines and firs dominate up to 11,000 feet, where bare rock takes over.

Wild animals abound: markhor, ibex, bear, leopard, flying fox, snowcock, various partridges, and up to four foot long lizards. Eagles and hawks swoop down upon the terraced villages looking for prey. Macaque (rhesus monkeys) swing through the trees. In the lower courses of the rivers, men cast their weighted nets for the *shir mahi* (milk fish). Winters are severe with heavy snowfalls. Runoffs from spring rains and melted snow rush down streams, which can be crossed only by the ingeniously constructed, wooden, cantilevered bridges, or simple rope bridges. Few trails in the interior of Nuristan permit donkey or horse traffic, thus everyone moves on foot. Goods are transported on the backs of men and women in inverted conical, wooden-framed, rope or reed interlaced baskets.

In villages I have visited, I have found between 10-40 per cent of the males (few females were examined or questioned) to have blond or red hair, blue or other eye color combinations. Debets measured several groups of Pashai and others on the fringes of Nuristan, and concludes that these

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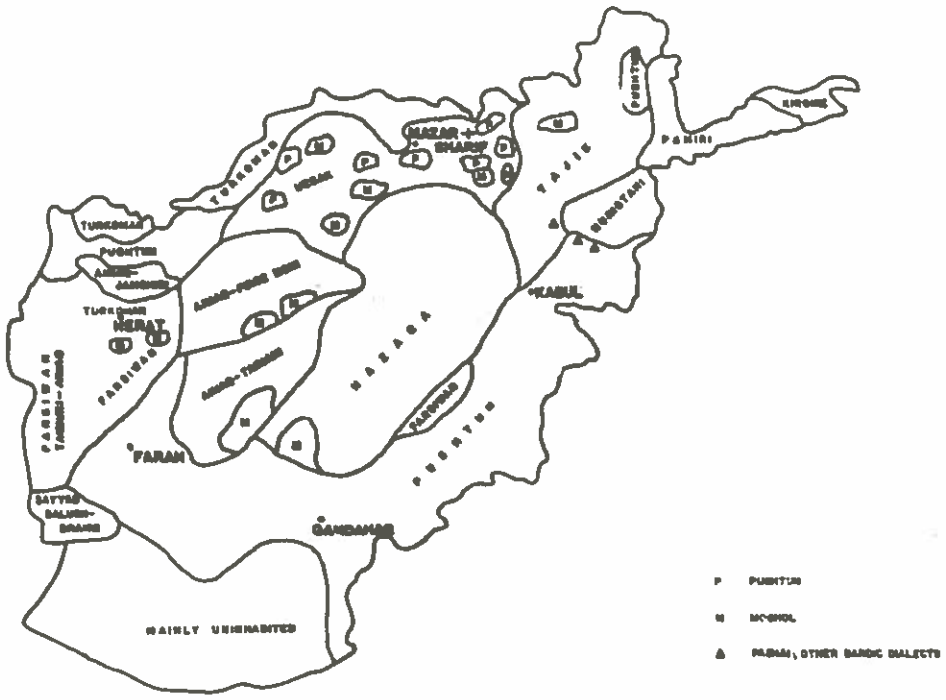
MAP I: MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS OF AFGHANISTAN



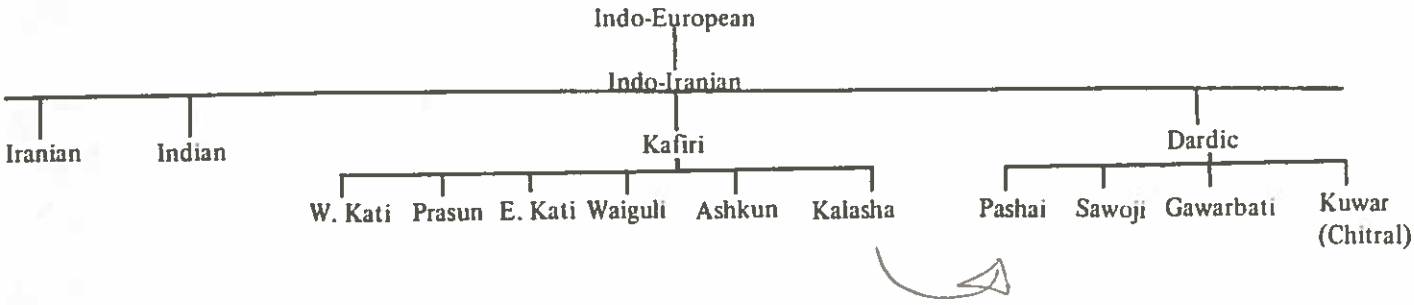
peripheral groups are more closely related "to the peoples of northwestern India and Pakistan, than they are to Western Europe."[6] He does concede a lighter pigmentation than with surrounding groups, and partly attributes this to "isolation." Whatever the reason, an increase in blondism becomes obvious, even to the most superficial observer.

The history of Nuristan remains obscure. The people have been mentioned as living in the same general area since the 3rd or 2nd millennium B.C., for the Hindu epic Rigveda and the Puranas mention the *Ilenas*, a possible reference to Kafiristan.[7] Classical sources such as Quintus Curtius Rufus (ca. 50 A.D., see Appendix A) and Arrian (ca. 100 A.D.) discuss the Kafir. Even earlier, Herodotus (and those historians who pirated his work) loosely describes people similar to the Kafirs, but living in Ethiopia![8] Modern Nuristani legends relate how Kafir warriors repulsed Alexander's left flank of troops several times as it moved towards Swat. Impressed, the mighty Macedonian asked the Kafir to send a contingent to fight with him in his Indian campaign. The Kafir sent between 1,000-2,000 young men, who did yeoman service as scouts for Alexander in the Battle of the Jhelum and in hundreds of smaller skirmishes.[9] They returned to Kafiristan bringing many Greek cultural elements (particularly sports and games), which at least partly accounts for the many Greek traits identified in Nuristani culture by subsequent travelers. No doubt some Greek elements in Kafir culture predate Alexandrian contact. Although much remains to be studied in Nuristan, I believe the people *may* ultimately be found to represent the easternmost remnants of the first major explosion (3rd-2nd millenniums B.C.) of Indo-European speakers from south Russia and Central Asia, and that possibly the Basques may represent the westernmost extension of this same explosion. Many intensive studies of both these and comparisons with the relative isolates of the Caucasus are urgently needed. In addition to ethnolinguistic research, I would like to have a physical anthropologist take blood samples for comparative studies from the Kunar River through the center of Nuristan to Munjan (Tajik). Of course, these speculations should in no way be taken as fact, and in the light of our present information must remain speculations until the research mentioned above have been undertaken.

Tamerlane (May 1398 A.D.; see Appendix B) and Babur (1507 A.D.) also had bloody confrontations with the Kafirs.

The first documented European visit to the Kafir area was a British expedition in 1885, led by Colonel William Lockhart.[10] The classic work of Robertson, however, remains the major source on pre-Muslim Kafiristan. The autobiography of Abdur Rahman Khan[11] contains a wealth of information on the 1895-96 wars to convert the Kafir to Islam. All studies of importance have been excellently annotated in a bibliography by Jones.[12]

Linguistically, Nuristan presents a bewildering plethora of dialectal variations. G. Morgenstierne divides the linguistic picture into Dardic and Kafiri dialects, which some linguists place in separate categories of Indo-European.[13]



Cultural stubbornness (or continuity of identification) at least partly accounts for the persistence of dialectic differences. For example, when different terms for such basic kinship relationships as father, mother, brother, sister occur in Wama and Supregul, only a few hours walk apart, more appears to be involved than simple linguistic fragmentation. In-group identity and pride are the keys. Now many Nuristani speak either Pashto (in the east and south) or Farsi (west and north), the languages of their neighbors, which serve as a *lingua franca*.

	Fa.	Mo.	Bro.	Sis.
Wama	Dai	Arlu	Bra	Saus
Supregul	Bow	Oyyum	Blum	Sawum

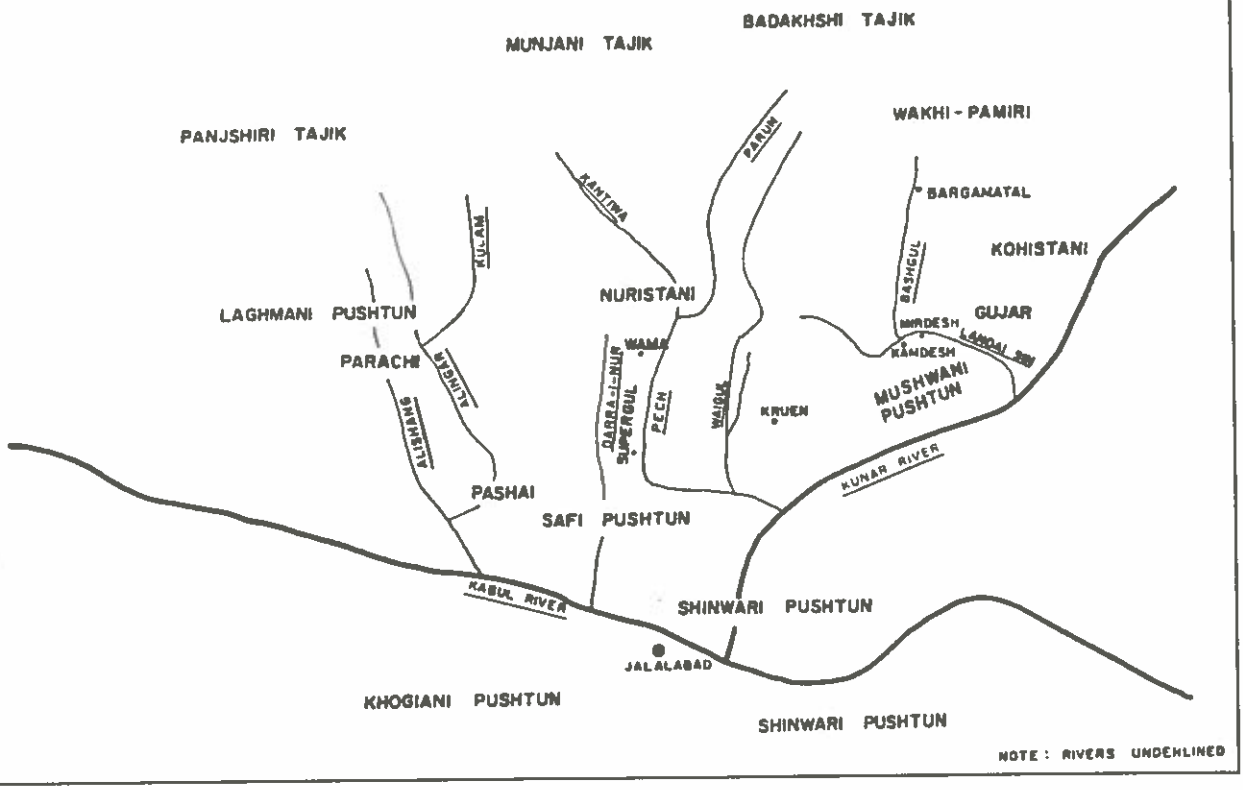
Marriage usually occurs outside the village, but within the same valley, i.e., village exogamy and valley endogamy, although instances of intervalley exogamy have been reported by Robertson (Waigul and Kamdesh) and Palwal (Waigul and Wama; Wama and Bashgul; Parun and Munjan). Kinship, however, generally extends the length of the valley, and most inhabitants have kinsmen in each village. Indeed, in Kafir days, fights seldom took place between villages in the same valley.

Each valley and village has a distinct name for its own valley dialect, although in the east, two major groupings are recognized for all: *Kantus* (north) and *Kamus* (south).

In pre-Muslim times, the Kafir groups were divided roughly into Siah Posh (Black Skins) and Safed Posh (White Skins), referring to the color of clothing worn.[14] Gharzai insists the difference relates to the fact that the northern Kafir used black wool clothing because the wool was plentiful, the reverse being true in the south.[15]

The Muslim neighbors of the Nuristani often call them *Sheikhan* (recent converts). The relative positions of the Nuristani with surrounding groups can be seen on Map 2. A vertical ethnographic stratigraphy exists as one travels up the major north-south valleys.

MAP 2: RELATIVE POSITION OF NURISTANI TO NEIGHBORING GROUPS



The Nuristani are primarily mountain cattlemen and spend nearly six or seven months a year (spring and summer) in highland alpine pastures at the heads of the valleys above their villages.[16] Members of the same family spell one another in the pastures, spending about two months at a time there. Many terms refer to cattle, an important prestige item in modern Nuristani society. I have collected as many as 20 distinct designations for cattle in a single village. Usually the terms distinguish certain color combinations, such as *lacunigar* (orange cow), *dzikegar* (black cow), *chitri star* (black and white), *wasinister* (red cow, black head), *zigimarnister* (black cow, white head), etc. About three-fourths of the terms always relate to cows, the remainder to bulls, primarily, *ashun* (with horns) or *kunashun* (without horns).

The domesticated goat also plays an important role in the economy. I have noted up to ten terms for goat, but never more than five for sheep. Again color is the key for both identifications.[17]

Many of the Kafir wooden grave effigies have male figures seated on single or double-headed horses and point to a possible nomadic Central Asian past for the Nuristani, but few horses or donkeys can be found in the region today. Horses and donkeys could exist in the difficult terrain, as cattle travel up and down the trails, but not efficiently. For trips of any length, travel by foot is quicker and safer, especially over the swaying rope bridges (found particularly on the fringes of eastern and western Nuristan) and the more numerous cantilevered wooden and stone bridges.

Women do most of the agricultural work, though men do perform some heavier tasks, such as removing large stones from the fields, building and repairing the terraced fields. Also, after the reaping is completed, the men, using long supple wooden flails, thresh the grains before the women winnow. The women use the unique Nuristani plow, which consists of two separate parts, the plow itself and a long stick which is attached to the neck of the oxen. Two women use the plow; one follows the plow, the other holds the stick at the neck of the oxen in order to guide the animal in the field. I have seen two sets of men plowing in the Landai Sin, although such cases are uncommon.

The plow, however, can be used only in the lower parts of the valleys, and in other areas

Women plowing, Kruen.

women usually use a long forked stick attached to a rope to break the ground. While one woman jabs the fork into the soil, the other, standing opposite, pulls the rope.

Because of the precipitous terrain, the fields, universally small, utilize almost every inch of available arable soil. The men construct intricate terraced fields with stones, and often move bottom soil long distances from stream beds to the fields. Crops that are grown include: highland wheat and barley, corn, various types of beans and millet. Rice, widely grown in the lower Kunar and Laghman valleys, seldom thrives in Nuristan. In many areas, women do not know how to prepare rice or even *kabob* (a skewered meat broiled over charcoal). They either boil meat or simply place it in hot coals for cooking.

The diet consists primarily of dairy products, milk (fresh and sour), cheeses, and butter. The Nuristani eat a cheese fondue made in the Continental style without the brandy, although some older men insist wine was added in pre-Muslim days. (Incidentally, to my firsthand knowledge, three types of local wine are still prepared and drunk in some parts of Nuristan. In one village the headman admitted wine was made and drunk surreptitiously until 1945, but denied its current use.) Breads are made from wheat, barley, corn, and millet. Their table manners also differ. Like other Afghans, the Nuristani eat with their fingers, but sit in wooden chairs and eat off either wooden tables with twisted wrought-iron legs or wicker-ware tables. Most Afghan groups sit on the floor or a *takht* (wooden platform) for meals.

Beekeeping and honey-eating are other unique items in the Nuristani cultural matrix, when compared to other Afghan groups. The Nuristani keep their bees in mud hives constructed into the walls of houses. Many small chickens, the size of doves or pigeons, roam the Nuristani rooftops, and are raised more for eggs than meat. Few drink tea or take sugar in Nuristan. Both are luxuries, but *gur* (solidified unrefined molasses) brought in by itinerant traders is very popular.

From head to toe the clothing of Nuristani men and women distinctly varies from that of other Afghans. Some interchange of clothing styles has occurred on the fringes. For example, Safi Pushtun often wear the *powkul* (felt hats with edges rolled up; generally made in Chitral) and the kilt-like, heavy woolen trousers of the Nuristani, but some upper class (especially *mullahs*) Nuristani have adopted the Pushtun turban. The *powkul*, however, proves a much more practical winter headgear, for it can be rolled down over the ears in cold

Cattlemen going to pasturelands, Kruen.

weather. Boys sport a forelock of hair, with the rest of the head shaven. Nuristani men either shave their heads or wear their hair long, depending on whether or not they live near a Pushtun (long hair) or Tajik (shaved head) group. Since about 1900, no men have worn the scalp lock at the occipital on the back of the head. Nuristani women wear their hair in braids, often piled on top of the head. Many eastern Nuristani wear the intricately embroidered white or light brown wool Chitrali cloaks.

Men wear heavy wool shirts, but cotton, purchased from an itinerant trader or in the border bazaars, is becoming popular for summer wear. Also, secondhand Western waistcoats, suitcoats, and sweaters, are being purchased in these bazaars and brought back to replace the traditional clothing.

Most Nuristani still wear the *budzun* (as it is called in Wama), a short, fringed jacket tied in the middle with tassles to give it a double-breasted appearance. Goatskin coats with hair on the inside are still popular in most of Nuristan. Boys usually wear goatskin coats until they move to the pasturelands for the first time, and thus achieve adulthood. Men wear short kilt-like trousers, and long *paitawa* (leggings which protect the legs in the wooded areas). Many men often go barefoot even in the cold winter snows. The distinctive Nuristani knife, worn on a silver-studded belt, is the most expensive item a man can purchase, but almost all men own at least one, the more elaborate, the more prestigious. In Kafir days warriors known for their generosity wore an earring on the right ear lobe to indicate great wealth and prestige. When they gave a large feast for the community, they would add a little silver ring to the earring.

Women wear colorfully embroidered blouses, pantaloons, or skirts and black woolen shawls, often covered with cowry shells if the woman is from a wealthy family. Sometimes they wear *paitawa* to protect their legs when skirts are worn. The women also wear elaborate silver necklaces and long distinctively designed silver earrings.

Both men and women wear leather or straw sandals in the summer. Women also go barefoot in winter, or wear buskin-like boots of cowhide in which they place dry grass and straw to help keep the feet dry in inclement weather. When not barefoot, men wear the same type of buskin.

All Nuristanis carry heavy walking sticks for protection and balance on the hillside trails.

Because matches are difficult to obtain, most Nuristanis carry flint and steel kits so they can start a fire at any time.

As in many societies, the fireplace was sacred to the Kafir in pre-Muslim times, and even today, many a modern Nuristani will flick a few drops of butter, cheese, blood from meat, or hunks of bread into the fire before he begins to eat. When asked why, he will reply that this is custom.

In the homes a simple smoke hole in the center of the roof permits smoke to escape. Standing in a room in which food is being cooked makes breathing difficult and the eyes smart, for much of the smoke remains inside the room. The inside of most houses in Nuristan is deeply ingrained with soot. Because of this, the Nuristani keeps most of his household goods stored in large elaborately carved wooden boxes. Bowls of walnut wood and other wooden objects acquire a black patina and superficially resemble ebony. In Kafir times, the storage boxes also served as coffins, for people were buried with most of their clothing and household goods.

Though I am not an ethnomusicologist and feel unqualified to comment on the specifics of the music of Nuristan, the music does sound different from that of the rest of Afghanistan. My collection of tapes is deposited at the Indiana University Archives for Primitive Music. Among the musical instruments is a unique five- or six-stringed, plucked harp (*awunz* or *waj*, the name varying from valley to valley) usually 50 centimeters long and 40 centimeters tall, with a wooden resonance box. Its origin still remains a mystery. I have also seen one large ten-string harp from Kantiwa (which measured 90 by 90 centimeters) which no one knew how to play.[18] Other instruments include the bowed *sanai*, a two-holed flute called an *udlu*, the tamborine (*daira*), and drum.

No bazaars exist in Nuristan, and items desired from the outside world are brought in by itinerant traders, or the Nuristani will make a trek to the

Bari musicians in Wama.

Nuristanis, Wama.

Portrait, redhead, blue eyes: Darra-i-Kur.

nearest bazaar on the edge of their territory. Major items brought in from the outside are salt, tea, *gur*, sugar, cloth, guns, kerosene and kerosene lamps, cowry shells for decorating the woman's headshawl, and other clothing. These items are traded for cattle, goats (usually one cow equals seven goats), butter, lumber, handicrafts, and money, though away from the main valleys cash is seldom used today.

Exchange within the village or between neighboring villages (or payment to the *bari* artisans) is usually in so many *pow* of butter, measured in wooden or stone bowls with one, two, and five *pow* capacities.

Many Nuristani live in the valleys west of the Kunar River from Asmar to Barikot. In the spring they float oak logs down the flooded side streams. The Mushwani Pushtun pick up the logs at the Kunar River and float them downstream for sale at Chiga Serai or the Jalalabad area. Bazaar lumbermen sell the logs in Jalalabad, Kabul, and elsewhere. Each Nuristani lumberman carves his mark on the logs for identification. The Mushwani then pay the Nuristani a certain percentage of the take, usually 50 per cent.

Probably the most significant difference in Nuristani material culture when compared to the rest of Afghanistan is the dominant role wood plays in the lives of the people. As one travels up the valleys into Nuristan, house types slowly begin to change; mud hut and pisé construction in the Kunar river valley; stone foundations and mud walls at midvalley; all stone houses; stone and wood; and wood with clay chinks between the logs. With only an adze and knives, the *bari* (former slaves of the Kafir) craftsmen dress the logs and often carve elaborate designs into the wood, particularly on the *usultun*, the four pillars centered inside each Nuristani house. The symbolic significance was unknown even when Robertson visited the area in the late 1800s. The *usultun* generally encompass the hearth area with the smoke hole directly above. The actual construction of the house is undertaken by the individual owner, assisted by friends and relatives.

The *bari* function as the artisans in Nuristani society. Generally, a few live in each village. Wama, for example, with about 200 houses, has 12 *bari* households; Kruen, with 500 houses, has 10 *bari* houses. The *bari* are masons, potters, silver and goldsmiths, ironmongers and blacksmiths, shoemakers, musicians, but most of all, carpenters and woodcarvers. In addition to dressing lumber and making the walking sticks and *usultun*, the *bari* woodcarvers produce ladders, wooden drains, tables (with twisted iron legs), chairs, stools, beds, storage boxes, spoons, bowls (also carved of steatite), clothes racks, and, in Kafir times, they carved the grave effigies and coffins.

Although King Amanullah (1919-1929) abolished slavery, the *bari*, like many Negro sharecroppers in the American South, still live as virtual slaves in some relatively isolated villages. All *bari* exist as a depressed class, and no respectable cattleman will marry or permit any of his children to marry into the *bari*. Usually the *bari* live clustered in one section of a village, however, in some of the out-of-the-way villages, individual *bari* families live adjacent to their former masters.

In one village with which I am familiar, the Nuristani *malik* (village headman) confessed that his village gave up their slaves as late as 1955. "However, they had better not make any decisions without consulting us, such as moving to another village," he added darkly.

The *bari* are paid for their services in trade, and often sell their surplus to itinerant peddlers for money. They have also begun to sell their handicrafts for cash and in some areas have become important sources of capital. At times the cattlemen sell livestock to the *bari* in order to obtain cash, so at least some *bari* now own livestock which was not permitted in Kafir times. They may eventually emerge as a capital-oriented minority class.

Individual freedom is prevalent in Nuristani local government. The people have retained many elements of the pre-Muslim structure, but in the past decade they have become increasingly involved with central government officials because of the improvement of the road system around outlying areas. Administratively, Nuristan is mainly divided between two provinces (Kumar and Laghman), but some groups also live in Badakhshan and Ningrahar.

Naturally, the freedom exercised in Nuristan does not extend to the *bari*, but technically, all men, be they wealthy or laborers for others, have equal rights before the *uru* or *pechala* (village council). In the spring each family elects a member to the council, which then selects its leader called the *urjast* or *malik*. However, in some areas the entire village elects the leader from the *uru*. The *bari* may have a nonvoting representative on the *uru*. Former *maliks* constitute an inner (or upper) council of *mirs*, who are always consulted before decisions are finalized.

In pre-Muslim days a man achieved power in three interrelated ways; i.e., wealth in cattle, bravery in war, generosity to his neighbors in peace. Being born into a wealthy family made the first step easier. In order to join the formalized *jast* (an informal grouping of men who achieve the distinction through "property fighting," usually over a two to three year period, depending upon the area), a man must give a specified number of feasts for the *jast* and for the community as a whole; usually the number was ten for the *jast* and 11 for the entire community.[19] One obvious function of these confrontations was to keep the distribution of wealth fairly level, for all sacrificial animals were divided equally among the entire village or the *jast*, depending on the feast recipient.

In order to maintain his wealth or continue to participate in the property fighting (which, incidentally, could be called a positive potlatch, because the property was not destroyed wantonly but distributed), a man participated in livestock raids on other valleys. In the process of the raids he must kill or be killed, and take scalps or heads. For each dead enemy, the Kafir kept score on a stick, each notch making him more important. Some groups drove studs into the score pole to indicate men, women, and children killed. In Kafir warfare, no quarter was given and no distinction made between age or sex. The number of those slain counted more than the quality of resistance.

As well as the normal property fighting, each death, birth, wedding, or other life crisis was accompanied by feasts, the more elaborate, the greater the prestige to the donating individual. Sometimes, entire families would concentrate, for honor to one was honor to all. In many areas, two or three major feasts a week occurred, so wealth was continually being redistributed. Even the *bari* received an equal share.

A successful property fighter became a member of the *jast*. In addition, brave warriors were given the title *shomach* (or *shurmach*). Members of the *jast* were usually elected at least once to the *uru*; sometimes they were elected *malik* or *urjast*, and eventually joined the inner group of *mirs*. Thus the cycle continued as long as a man was in his prime. Since he needed cattle and other livestock to give big feasts, he must be a brave warrior to steal the cattle.

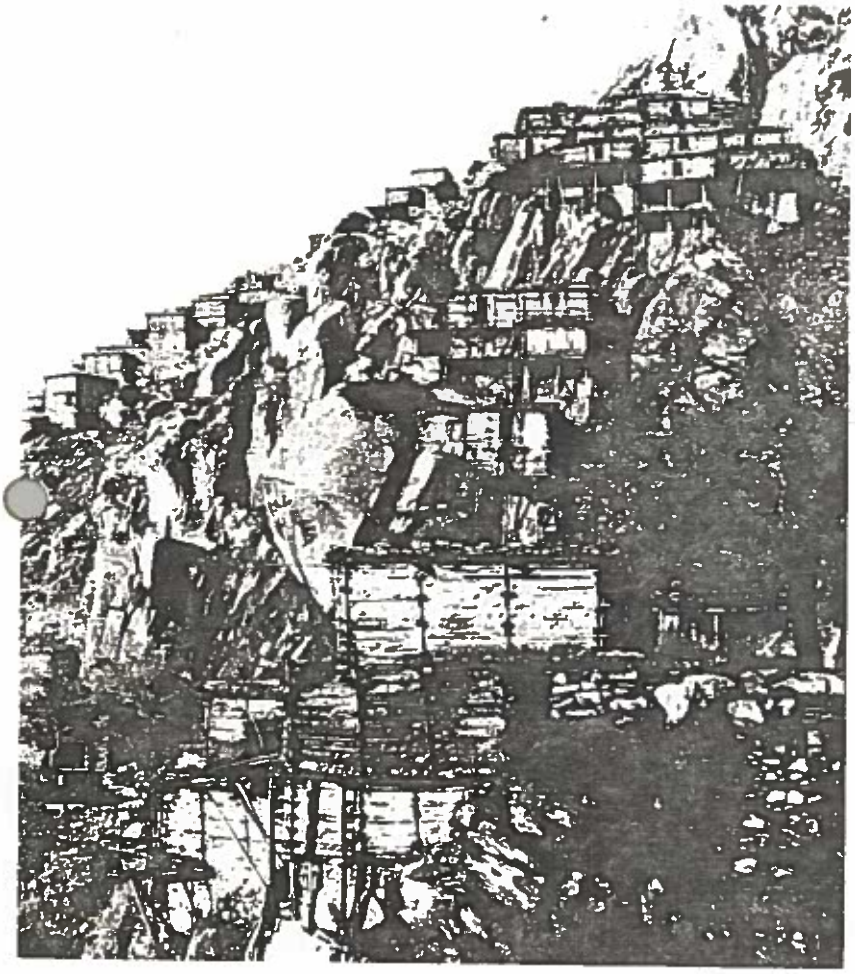
Today, to the best of my knowledge, the *jast* no longer exists, because, although blood feuds do occur, no great raiding parties can elude the long arm of the Afghan army. Only the *uru* and the supreme inner council of *mirs* still function. The villages annually elect the *uru* and *malik* who must now be approved by the central government.

Villages often consist of three wards, each with a separate name and mosque, and each ward annually elects a *malik* (instead of one per village as in Kafir times), who continues to serve as long as he is in favor. Increasingly, his role is that of intermediary between his people and the government. The hand of central authority continues to reach up the valleys into this area.

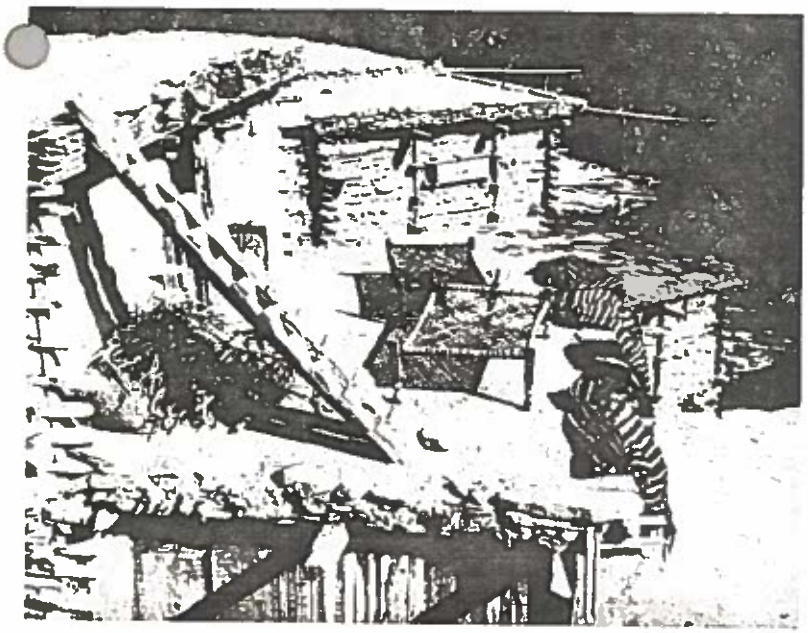
Nuristan, so recently converted to Islam (1895-96) offers three religious faces: (1) the new fanaticism of the convert; (2) old Kafir customs, now considered Islamic; (3) pride of the Kafir warrior past, though now dimly remembered by the elderly and passed on in impure form to the youth.

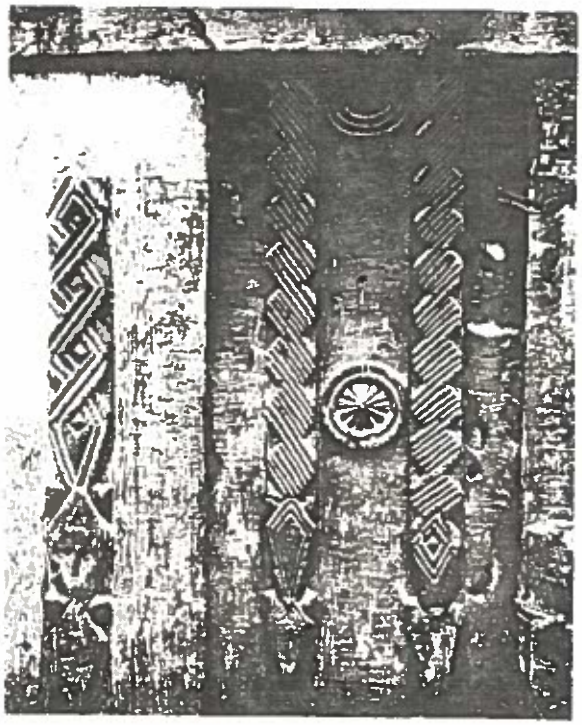
Some Kafirs (particularly Bashguli[20]) had accepted Islam before Amir Abdur Rahman forcibly converted all Afghan Kafirs, destroyed most of their wooden grave effigies (he thought they were all idols), overturned the wooden coffins of the dead, forbade the making of wine, and took many of the sons of the power elite to Kabul as hostages. Incidentally, many Nuristani became soldiers (as do talented members of minority groups in many societies) and today a large number hold high command positions.

To speed up conversion, the religious strong arm of Abdur Rahman's army encouraged the Kafir to

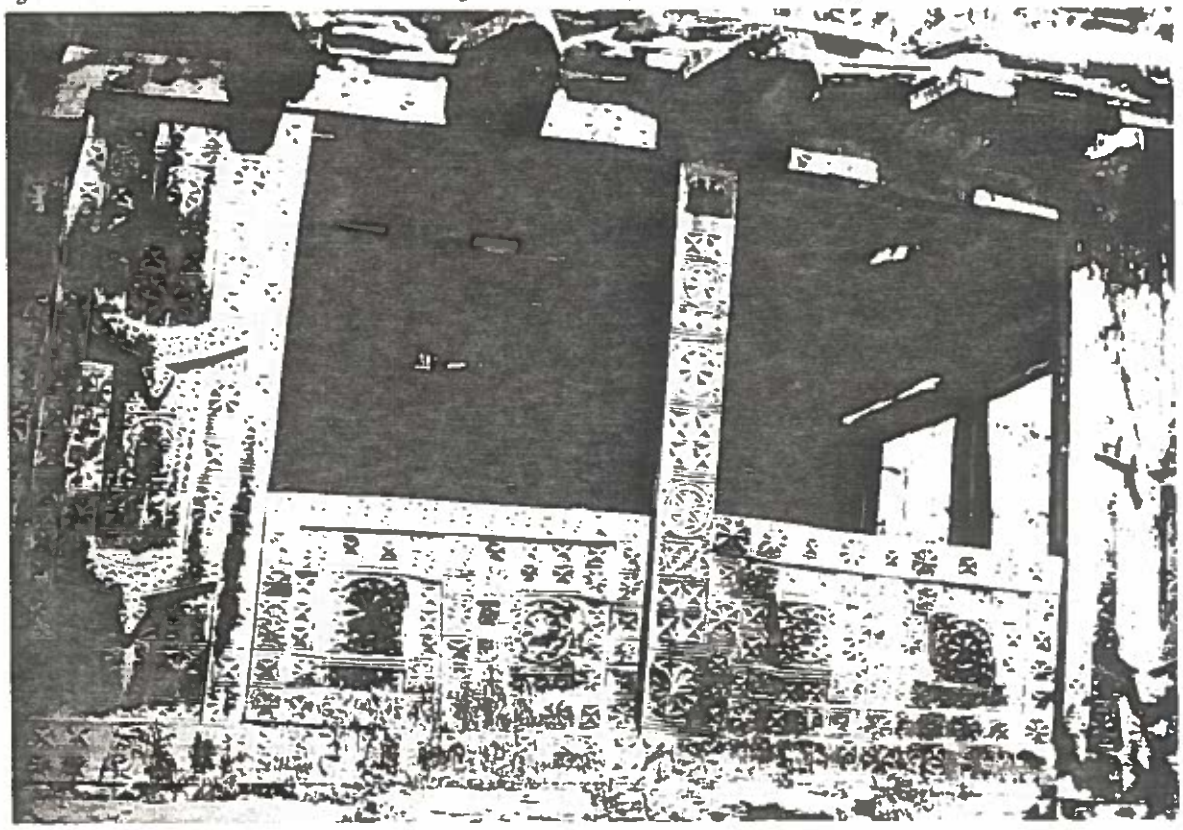


The village of Wama (left) with houses clinging to the rocky hillside. A close-up of house types in Kruen (below left) shows a carved wooden ladder and storage box built into the wall. Below is a sample of woodcarving on a door in Wama. The motif is of serpents.





Two views of a modern Nuristani shrine to a warrior-hero, who had killed many Muslims during the 1895-96 war. Note *markhor horhs* alongside stylized carved goat horns. Photo above shows shrine roof with hole for soul to escape and the grave markers of the wives and children in foreground. The mosque is next to the shrine.



believe they were really a wandering tribe of the Quraish (Arab tribe of the Prophet Mohammed) lured away from Islam. Therefore, in accepting Islam, they were simply returning to their original religion. I have collected the Quraish origin myth at many places in Nuristan: Wama, Mirdesh, Kamdesh, and Bargamatal. The Nuristanis at Supregul told me the Kafir settled between Herat and Balkh after coming from Arabia. In the sixteenth century by Supreguli accounts the Muslims drove the Kafir to Chitral, and then chased the original Chitralis out of Kafiristan and settled there.

For the sake of continuity, (and the perpetuation of their own power) most Kafir priests became Muslim *mullahs*, and many of their sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons function as religious leaders today.

Few in the areas I have visited remember much about the old gods and religions. At Bargamatal, for example, only two elderly men (both over 80 by conservative estimates) and the wife of one admitted any extensive knowledge. The woman knew much more than the men, and constantly corrected or elaborated upon statements made by her husband and the other elder.

Several major gods and goddesses (*Imra, Moni, Gish, Bagisht, Dizane, Krumai, Nirmali*) appear to have been universal in Kafiristan, but each village had its own quota of nature spirits, living in natural objects such as trees, rivers, stones, and mountains. Each section of a village and each warrior had his own protective private spirit, acquired during a trance or dream, and the spirit could take any shape or form. All gods, according to Robertson[21] lived as humans who were deified after death. Most, other than *Bagisht*, were born of *Imra's* breath. A somewhat contradictory belief, since *Imra* also lived as a man.

The universe of the Kafir existed in seven levels, the uppermost being the abode of the gods (*Urdesh*), the lowest contained both heaven and hell and was called *Yurdesh*. The remaining five levels existed in between. Level four is designated as the earth.

Robertson claimed more fairies and demons existed than could be counted, and various magic rituals existed to ward off their evil manifestations.[22]

One problem in identifying old gods is that the religious form often remains after its practitioners forget the rationale. Robertson in 1896 published a long list of gods, but the people in Bargamatal could remember (or would only mention) those included in Chart 1.

Robertson lists many villages where wooden or stone idols represented *Imra*, but modern Bargamatal informants insisted no idols of *Imra* existed in Kafir times. *Imra*, they said, was like Allah. They, however, stated that two other terms referred to *Imra*, making him a respectable trinity: *Dezel* (the creator) and *Mrar* (the owner); ergo, *Imra* (the supreme deity) created all and owned all.

The Bargamatal informants stated no idols ever represented the war god, *Gish*, the most popular god in the Kafir pantheon.[23] (My elderly informants seemed anxious at all times to avoid mention of idols, insisting they were now good Muslims). At many places all over Nuristan *Gish* performed great deeds as a warrior when he lived on earth as a human. Warriors made periodic sacrifices to *Gish*, particularly before or after a raid, at the places where he performed his superhuman feats. *Gish*, according to the Bargamatali informants, taught the old religion to the Kafir, and someday will return. The messiah complex dies hard.

Bagisht served as an intermediary between gods and men, and was a joker who punished or played tricks on man. Often *Bagisht*, therefore, appeared as a man, but since he had no bone in his right thumb, he could be identified on shaking hands, a common mode of greeting in Nuristan, but not in most of the rural Muslim world. My informants later contradicted themselves by stating that no one had ever seen *Bagisht*.

The only other old gods remembered by my informants (I did not prompt them by mentioning names until they completely exhausted their volunteered list) were *Suteran* (probably Robertson's *Sataram*, the Rain God), and a group of seven brothers (*Sut Panobra*), who assisted *Gish* in warfare and helped him instruct the people of Kafiristan in the ways of the old religion. Robertson reports the seven brothers or seven sisters

Chart 1

The Kafir Pantheon

From Robertson*		Remembered at Bargamatal: 1963	
God or Goddess	Function	God or Goddess	Function
Imra (Indra?)	Creator	Imra	Creator
Moni (Mani?)	The Prophet; destroyed trouble making demons		
Gish	God of War; most popular	Gish	God of War; taught rituals and ceremonies; to return as Messiah
Bagisht	God of Wealth; only deity with normal birth; intermediary between man and man	Bagisht	God of Wealth; played jokes on men
Arom (Ram?)	God of Peace; sacrificed to at end of war		
Sataram (Sudaram) (Sita Ram? Shri Ram?)	God of Weather; especially rain	Suteran	God of Rain
Inthr (Indra? Mithr)	God of the Vine (grapes, wine)		
Duzhi Nong Parade Shomde	Name only; function unknown		
Dizane (Disni)	Fertility Goddess of wheat; protects men in battle; mother of Bagisht, father a demon		
Nirmali (Jestak)	Fertility Goddess; protects pregnant women; protects *pshur* (shamans)		
Krumai (Shumai)	Fertility Goddess of goats; appears as wild goat		
		Sut Panobra	Assisted Gish in war and helped him instruct the people

*See Robertson 1896, p. 381.

motif for several gods and goddesses.[24] They usually have the duality of good and evil. When the *Sut Panobra* died (or when Islam entered Bargamatal), they became malevolent jinn, and their presence caused violent death to those nearby. To the Bargamatali, all the old gods, except *Imra* (who has always been one with Allah) are now *shaitan* (devils) or evil jinn.

In the old Kafir days, a shaman (*pshur*) went into self-induced trances and the spirits of various gods (particularly *Gish*) possessed his soul in order to answer questions concerning success in raids. Even though the *pshur* might predict victory, the people usually sacrificed to *Imra* and *Gish* to insure success. The *pshur* also diagnosed causes of death while in a trance. If a witch caused the death, a lamb had to be killed to release the soul of the dead individual. If a fairy were responsible, a white goat had to be sacrificed. Witches (*danek*) were sometimes seen as a woman with long teeth, large bosoms, uncombed hair standing on end, and big feet. Only witches can control humans with black magic, and can capture and live in human bodies while performing their evil work.

A folktale from Bargamatal illustrates this:

> A brother and a sister disappeared for several days, and then returned to the village. The girl, who was very beautiful, married the best known *shomach* in the village. Shortly after the marriage, a bear began to kill the cattle of the warrior at night. No one could catch the bear in the act. One night, however, the warrior waited and was able to kill the bear. At death, the bear's body changed into the brother of the warrior's wife, and, although bleeding, he fled to a cave. The sister followed her brother to the cave; the husband pursued them. He looked into the cave and was horrified for his wife and brother had turned into witches. The husband then knew that witches had captured their bodies when they had disappeared from the village. Since witches cannot be killed, the husband blocked up the mouth of the cave so that the two witches could never escape again.

In a nearby valley, the people of Bargamatal pointed out this cave to me.

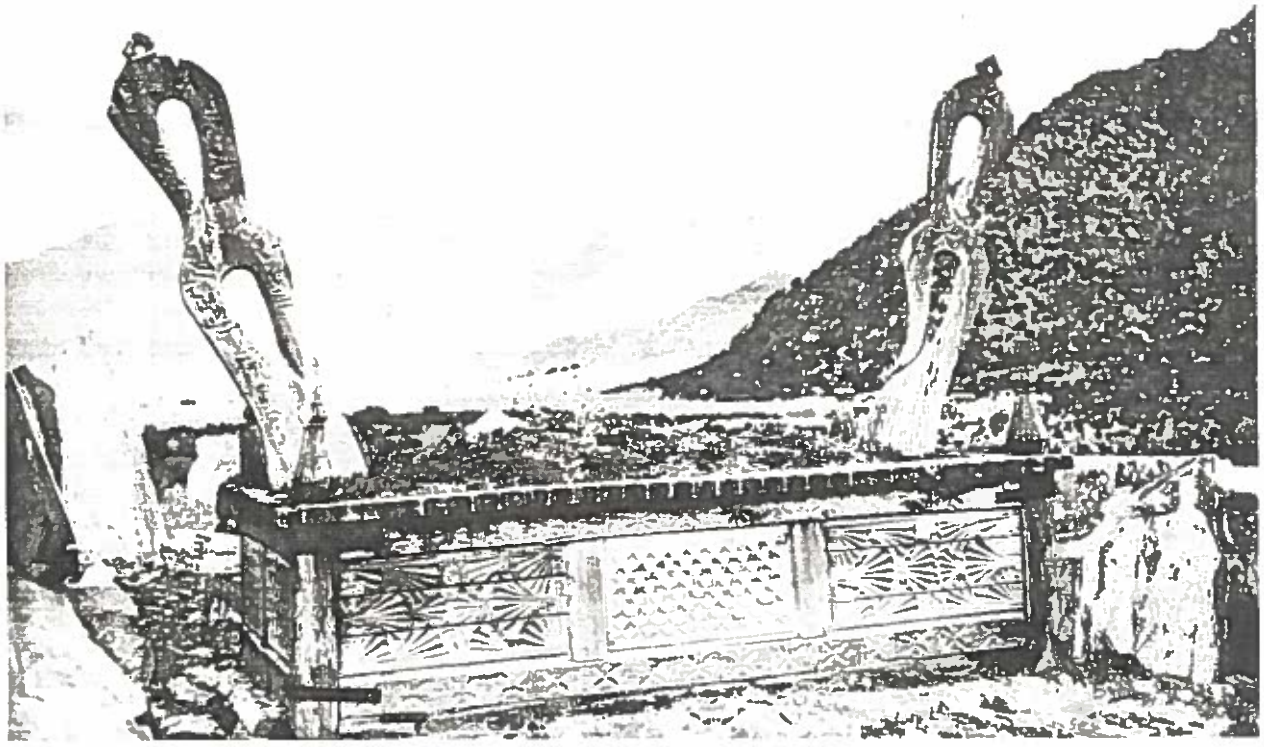
Another interesting story told in several valleys of Nuristan concerns a manlike beast which kills cattle, sheep, and goats and even attacks humans at night. Several Nuristani showed me the marks where they had been bitten by this creature, which, when described resembles the *yeti* or "abominable snowman" of the Himalayas. I strongly suspect that these abominable snowman stories at least partly relate to the werewolf legends which exist in various forms throughout the entire Eurasian mountain chain from the Eastern European Carpathian Mountains to the Himalayas.

Another modern Nuristani superstition insists that gray cats and all snakes contain evil jinn, and, therefore, must be destroyed.

A death in the village, particularly of a notable man or woman, or a man killed in battle brought about a life crisis of great magnitude during Kafir times. The more livestock sacrificed and divided among the mourners, the more honor to the dead and the living. The ceremony often lasted three days or more for a truly great warrior. The body was placed in an above ground four-legged wooden coffin (*shni* and the place of burial is called *shnitan*) with rocks piled on the lid to keep out animals and hold down the smell as the flesh putrified.

The coffins, constructed in the same way as the houses, consisted of wooden planks dovetailed together with pegs. Seldom did a coffin have any carved designs. Sometimes three or four bodies of common mortals were stuffed into the same coffin, but not so with heroes and notables. The Kafir buried the dead in their best clothing and with their weapons or other items they held dear during life. Grave robbing was punishable by death, for the Kafir believed that the spirit or soul remained in the area at death. The soul of a man became a shadow as seen in dreams. At times, the dead visited the living in dreams either to warn or comfort them. Relatives usually brought food and drink to the *shnitan* during the first year of interment.

The "good" Kafir eventually ended up in paradise, but often, too pleased with his life on earth, his spirit refused to leave immediately. Many hung around for years and even generations residing in a



Modern Nuristani grave with markers near Narai.

wooden effigy. Once admitted to *Yurdesh* (paradise or hell), the spirit could not return to the outer world of the living. As long as the spirit remained among the living (as indicated in dreams or identified by the shaman), the living must coddle the not-so-dead kinsman or ancestor.

The Kafir wooden grave effigies and idols have excited scholars of several disciplines (among them anthropologists and religious art specialists), but because the iconoclastic armies of Amir Abdur Rahman destroyed most of the effigies, idols, shrines, and coffins of Kafiristan during the 1895-96 invasion little is really known about them. Most were simply memorial effigies to the dead, but idols representing gods did sit in shrines and other holy places. One unanswered question, however, is whether or not any of the notables and warriors represented by the effigies became gods after death. I believe some probably did become local deities, for not only are some of the surviving wooden idols smeared with a mixture of wheat or millet, butter, wine, and blood from sacrificed animals, but so are some of the effigies in the Kabul Museum.[25] The armies of Amir Abdur Rahman reported stone effigies, but apparently none survived the 1895-96 invasion.[26]

Lesser beings than the honored warriors and women, although not forgotten by their families, did not receive the lavish treatment of the great, and often had no effigies—or a very modest one—erected in their honor. These individuals departed rather shortly after death to either heaven or hell. The Kafir often dumped the bones of ordinary mortals out of their coffins to make room for other bodies.

About a year after the death of a notable, the family again sacrificed many livestock, and erected an effigy (*moteh*) near the local meeting grounds, so that the spirit drawn to the effigy could attend the meetings of the *uru*. Actually, in several places where I collected genealogies and kinship terms, even modern Nuristani included the dead in the active system, as though they still lived and had reciprocal functions with the group.

The size and form of the effigy depended on the deeds of the deceased, the wealth of the family, the magnitude of the funeral sacrifice, and the skill of the individual *bari* woodcarver.[27] Often the *bari* carved a warrior sitting on either a single-headed or double-headed horse. The warrior would be fully armed, with his penis exposed, and wearing an

old-style Persian turban. The pudenda of women effigies were also graphically represented. Both sexes wore jewelry and sometimes carried ceremonial axes.

On most known effigies, the relative size of the head to body size is inordinately large, which emphasizes the Kafir belief of the importance of the head as a receptacle of the individual spirit. At times, when a man was killed in warfare and his body could not be returned to his village, friends cut off and brought back the head of the slain warrior, which would be buried with the same pomp and ceremony as though the whole body were present.[28]

In the old days, blood had to be wiped out with blood, so prisoners (particularly Muslim) were dispatched at the coffins of those slain in battle to the accompaniment of elaborate sacrifices and feasting.

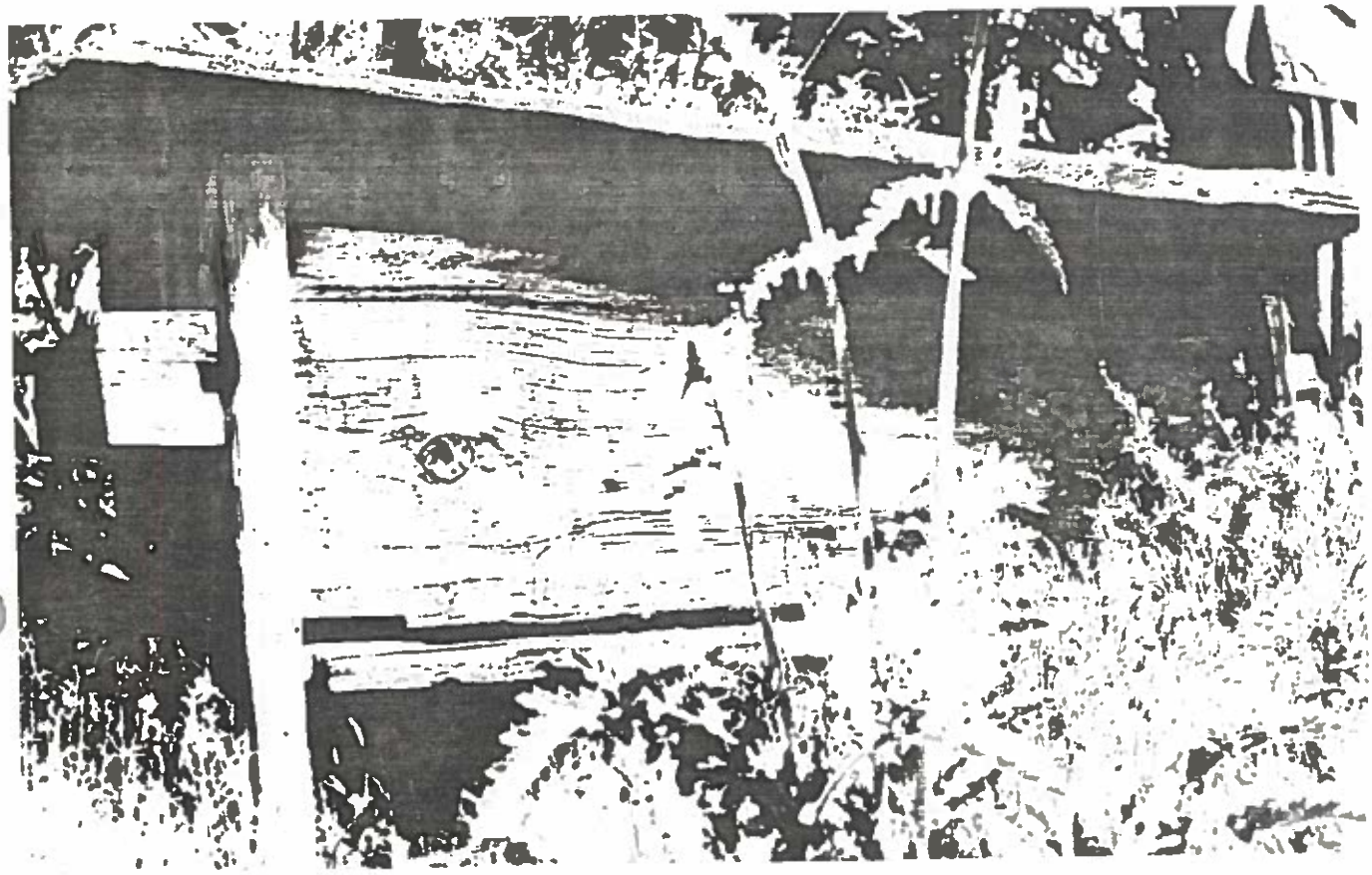
Once the spirit of an effigy had risen, however, the bones of even the notable dead received no special treatment, and were often unceremoniously dumped out or, in rare cases, buried in special areas according to some informants. Some Kafir opened graves to fondle the bones of their notable ancestors, possibly to try to capture by osmosis some of the mana possessed by the dead when living. Generally, in Kafir times children were buried in stone pots.

Now the Nuristani follow the Muslim ritual, but the head still receives special attention during the annointing of the dead body, according to informants.

To the best of my knowledge no Kafir coffin in Afghanistan had been examined by an outsider in the twentieth century until 1965 in Kruen. At first the local people told me the bones were of an individual killed in a blood feud about 1935. The coffin, however, dates to pre-1895 when the soldiers of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan stormed Kruen, one of the last Kafir strongholds to be overrun. The soldiers destroyed all the hillside coffins, and fragments of planks today dot the steep path leading to the extant coffin. However, the one coffin I examined had survived because it was the highest and most difficult to reach.

Kafir Goat Fertility Goddess Dizane (?), Kabul Museum.

The oak wood coffin measured seven by two and one-half by three and one-half feet and had an east-west orientation, instead of the usual Muslim north-south body orientation. The skeleton was badly disarticulated and rodent droppings covered the bottom of the coffin. No skull could be found inside the coffin, but a pot, buried in the soil, 20 feet southeast and 20 feet higher than the coffin, contained a skull. I do not know if it belonged to



Kafir coffin outside Kruen.

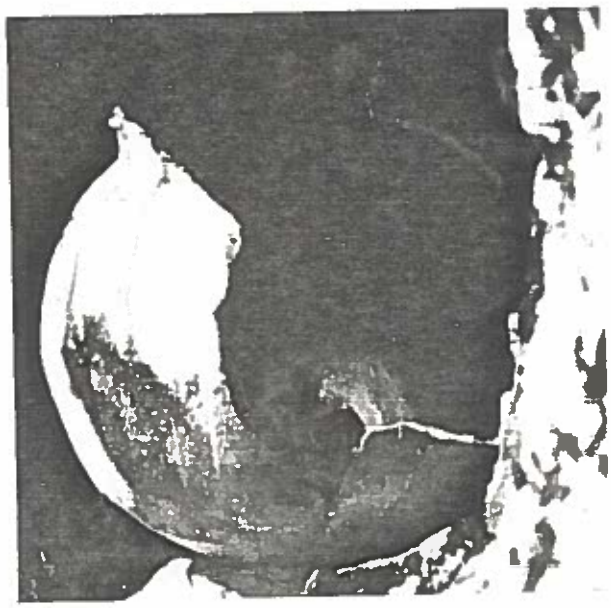
the same individual, and my Nuristani companion expressed surprise at finding the skull. (In Kafir times, if a man lost his head to his enemies, his kinsmen attempted to gain another head and bring it with his body, and, as stated earlier, war parties always tried to bring back the heads of slain comrades.)

Later, several knowledgeable men in Kruen expressed doubt that a 1935 homicide occupied the coffin, and believed the body to be that of a late nineteenth-century Kafir warrior. Whatever the case, the only known surviving Kafir coffin in Afghanistan now sits high on a hillside outside Kruen.

As mentioned earlier some obvious and some not so obvious Kafir religious manifestations linger on in Nuristan. Gharzai reports that after the women finish their agricultural work (plowing, planting, and reaping), the men thresh the grains with flexible wooden flails after sacrificing a goat by cutting off its head and having a feast.[29]

I witnessed the following "Muslim" ceremony in April 1963, in Wama, just prior to spring planting. A *mullah* cut off the head of a cow

Skull in pot near Kafir coffin, Kruen.



(instead of slitting its throat to make it *halal* or clean, as a Muslim would do) at the community meeting area and sprinkled a little blood with his knife blade in the direction of the fields. He symbolically buried several chunks of meat in a nearby field. The *mullah*, according to his interpretation, had performed a Muslim ritual, but I fail to detect a Muslim flavor in this type of sacrifice. The people of Wama, however, all received equal shares of the meat of the sacrificial animal, traditional in Kafir—as well as Muslim—times.

The man who contributes the animal for the spring sacrifice gains informal honor, but seldom do the old property-fighting festivals occur today. Well-being for the present overrides any future anticipated delights in Muslim heaven. Materialism (easily recognizable to Western and Muslim materialists) has slowly eroded part of the Nuristani's nonmaterial culture patterns.

In several subtle ways, the Nuristani, in spite of feeling the genuine fanaticism of the recent convert, strike back at Islam either consciously or subconsciously. In and around Kruen, for example, sit several burial shrines dedicated to men who fought the "Mussulman," as the 1895-96 invaders are called in Nuristan.[30] These heroes died *after* the Afghan conquest of the area, and they had been converted to Islam. However, each of these heroes is primarily remembered for the number of "Mussulman" he killed, and local people often use their Kafir (not their adopted Muslim) names in folktales. The shrines even have the sacred Kafir hole, constructed over the roof, so the spirit can escape to become a part of the community, although at the end the folkteller always adds, "and later go to the 'Mussulman' paradise." Although the body of a Kafir would be put in a coffin in pre-Muslim times, his spirit had always escaped through the central smoke hole in the roof of his hut before internment—if he still had his head.

The *bari* artisans have intricately carved these shrines with symbolic, pre-Muslim motifs, but today everyone claims ignorance of their meanings. Lost and locked in the carved designs on almost all modern objects or still lurking in the minds of some of the older Nuristani are the true meanings of these symbols, some common with other pre-Muslim or even prehistoric religions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The repeated circle possibly relates to a sun disk and ultimately to *Imra*, the Supreme Being; the snake may represent the power of *Imra* for he killed great serpents in his days as a human.[31] In several areas the snake-dragon can be shown in basaltic or granitic geological dikes along precipitous mountain walls. Hazrat Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad, is the St. George of the Muslims and in many areas of Afghanistan, villagers point out similar geological phenomena as serpents killed by him. The snake also could represent evil to ward off evil.

One obvious non-Islamic hangover, the goat cult, occurs throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, both in time and space[32] from the Middle Paleolithic[33] through the Neolithic and Bronze Age[34] to the present. The devout often cover modern Muslim *ziarat* (shrines) in the Iranian Plateau (culturally including Afghanistan and West Pakistan) with markhor and ibex horns, because, as the peasants say, it is simply *adat* (custom). The goat

Modern Nuristani grave markers at Pech Darra.

cult possibly relates to an ancient totemic identification by mountaineers with the virility and ruggedness of the mountain goat. Modern Nuristani (like their ancestor Kafir) hunt the ibex, markhor, and Marco Polo sheep (in the extreme northeast), and ram horns, realistically and stylistically portrayed, occur on many items of folk art, including wooden and stone bowls, *usultun*, and doors.

All over Nuristan (and extending into neighboring non-Nuristani areas, the first occurring 25 kilometers west of Chiga Serai on the way to Jalalabad) wooden and stone grave markers appear suspiciously like stylistic representations of the Kafir grave effigies. Carved by the *bari*, these grave markers either consciously or subconsciously represent the human figure. Some even suggest a man on horseback. Similar stone examples are found in the Darra-i-Nur.

The Nuristani have seen the light of Islam, but only fuzzily practice the true religion, and have incorporated Kafir motifs and mysteries into their brand of Islam. They go to the outside world readily, but prefer to keep the outside world away from their relatively inaccessible valleys. They do not have the formalized hospitality of the plainsmen and nomads, and unless one visits the area with a local inhabitant, hospitality may quickly become strained hostility.

Unlike the rest of Afghanistan, silence characterizes Nuristan. No jet planes fly overhead, no lorries rumble and grind along the narrow trails. At night, the people visit one another lighting their way with flaming torches which they thrust into the wall on entering a hut, and take away with them when they depart, leaving a flickering trail behind. Time almost stands still in Nuristan. The ticking of the clock gives way to the ecological calendar and man, working with nature as a partner, survives and prevails.

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APPENDIX A

QUINTUS CURITUS RUFUS WRITES

. . . . . he (Alexander) moved thence towards the city of Nysa. The camp, it so happened, was pitched under the walls on woody ground, and as the cold at night was more piercing than had ever before been felt, it made the soldiers shiver. But they were fortunate enough to have at hand the means of making a fire, for felling the copses they kindled a flame, and fed it with faggots, so that it seized the tombs of the citizens, which, being made of old cedar wood, spread the fire they had caught in all directions till every tomb was burned down. The barking of dogs was now heard from the town, followed by the clamour of human voices from the camp. Thus the citizens discovered that the enemy had arrived, and the Macedonians that they were close to the city.

The king had now drawn out his forces and was assaulting the walls, when some of the defenders risked an engagement. These were, however, overpowered with darts, so that dissensions broke out among the Nysaeans, some advising submission, but others the trial of battle. Alexander, on discovering that their opinions were divided, instituted a close blockade, but forbade further bloodshed.

After a while they surrendered, unable to endure longer the miseries of a blockade. Their city, so they asserted, was founded by Father Bacchus, and this was in fact its origin. It was situated at the foot of a mountain which the inhabitants called Meros, ... The king learned from the inhabitants where the mountain lay, and sending provisions on before, climbed to its summit with his whole army. There they saw the ivy plant and the vine growing in great luxuriance all over the mountain, and perennial waters gushing from its slopes. The juices of the fruits were various and wholesome since the soil favoured the growth of chance-sown seeds, and even the crags were frequently overhung with thickets of laurel and spikenard. I attribute it not to any divine impulse, but to wanton folly, that they wreathed their brows with chaplets of gathered ivy and vine leaves; and roved at large through the woods like bacchanals; so that, when the folly initiated by a few had, as usually happens, suddenly infected the whole multitude, the slopes and peaks of the mountain rang with the shouts of thousands paying their homage to the guardian divinity of the grove. Nay, they even flung themselves down full length on the greensward, or on heaps of leaves as if peace reigned all around. The king himself, so far from looking askance at this extemporaneous revel, supplied with a liberal hand all kinds of viands for feasting, and kept the army engaged for ten days in celebrating the orgies of Father Bacchus.[a]

[a]Translation from: *Ancient India: Its Invasions by Alexander the Great*, by John Watson McCrindle, New Edition 1894, Archibald Constable and Company, Westminister, 192-193.

APPENDIX B

TAMERLANE WRITES

I myself pursued my march towards the mountains of Kator. When I made enquiries concerning the extent and condition of that kingdom from Muzid, who was the chief man of Indarab, he informed me that the length of the kingdom of Kator stretches from the frontier of Kabul, and there are many towns and villages in this country. . . . . The country produces fruits, in large quantities, such as grapes, apples, apricots, and various other kinds. Rice and other grains are cultivated. Much wine is made, and all people, great and small, drink of it. The people eat swine's flesh. Cattle and sheep abound in this country. Most of the inhabitants are idolaters; they are men of a powerful frame and fair complexion. Their language is distinct from Turki, Persian, Hindi, and Kashmiri. Their weapons are arrows, swords and slings. Their ruler is called Adalshu. When I arrived at Khawak I perceived a dilapidated fort which I resolved to repair, so immediately gave orders to the soldiers to that effect, and it was speedily executed. As most of the route was rocky and precipitous, I ordered most of the nobles and all the soldiers to leave horses, camels, and superfluous baggage in this fort. In obedience to this order most of the nobles and all the soldiers accompanied me on foot, while I, relying on the assistance of Almighty God, pressed steadily forward to the conquest of Kator, and began to ascend the mountains.

In spite of the heat of the wind there was so much snow on the hills that the feet of both man and cattle helplessly sank in it. I was therefore obliged to halt during the day, but at night when the snow congealed I pursued my way over the frozen surface of the ice till I reached the top of the mountain. At daybreak, when the ice thawed, carpets and horse rugs were spread upon its surface and the horses kept upon them. At nightfall we again went on as before, and in this manner I crossed several lofty mountains, but the nobles were obliged to send back to the fort several of the horses they had brought with them. When I reached the top of a lofty mountain, such that there can be none higher than it, I found these wicked infidels had taken up their position in the caverns of the mountain, the entrances of which were blocked up with snow, so that they were almost inaccessible, nor, in spite of all my exertions, could I find a way to descend the mountain.

I was obliged to give orders to my brave soldiers to get down as best they could. The nobles and soldiery now began the descent. Some lying down on their sides and sliding over the snow, rolled themselves down to the bottom. Others fastening cords and long tent ropes to their waists and attaching one end of the ropes to the trees and rocks which were on the top, let themselves gently down. As for me, I gave orders that they should make me a basket of plants and wicker work. When they had made the basket they attached firmly to each of its four corners a rope 150 yards in length, and as I, since I undertook this expedition against the infidels, had made up my mind to undergo all manner of trouble and fatigue, I took my seat in the basket, and a body of men taking hold of the ends of those ropes lowered away gently till the rope had all run out, and then some persons scrambling down to before where I was, cleared away the snow and ice with spades and mattocks, and made a place for me to stand upon. The first body of men then having descended to this place, again lowered me gently, down as far as the ropes would reach. At the fifth repetition of this maneuvre I reached the bottom of the mountain. When in this manner all the nobles and soldiers had got down, some of the horses, my own private property, which had accompanied me, were let down in the same manner, that is by attaching ropes to their legs and shoulders, but out of the whole number only two reached the bottom in safety, all the others being dashed to pieces. When no more of my people remained above, since my object was the extermination of the infidels, grasping my scepter-sword in my hand I marched forward on foot one *parasang* into that rocky country, together with my nobility and troops. . . . . .

The ruler of Kator had a fort, on one side of which was a river, and beyond the river a lofty mountain reaching down to the water. . . . . On its being represented to me that this fort was the most important stronghold of the ruler of Kator in those parts, I resolved to subdue it. When I advanced into the neighbourhood of the fort I did not perceive a trace of the infidels, and when I came to the place itself I saw that they had abandoned it and fled. I obtained a booty of many sheep and other things here, and ordered that they should set fire to the houses and buildings of the city, in the midst of which the fort was built, and that they should level it with the ground.

Then crossing the river in haste and pursuing the track of the enemy, I reached the skirts of the mountain on the top of which the infidels had taken up their position in defiles and other strong places, I immediately gave orders to my valiant and experienced troops to ascend. Raising their war cry and shouting the *takbir*, they rushed to the attack, and before all the rest Shaikh Arslan Aztuman Kabak Khan, who is a lion in the day of battle, mounting the hill on the left hand, commenced the fight. Leading his men upon the infidels he put them to fight, and following up the enemy entered the fastnesses of the rock and sent numbers of the impious unbelievers to hell. Tawachi Ali Sultan, also on his side, made valiant assault upon the foe, and with his own regiment charged and routed the infidel enemy, sending numbers of them to hell.[a]

[a]Translation from: *The History of India As Told by Its Own Historians*, the posthumous papers of the late Sir H. M. Elliot edited by John Dawson, Susil Gupta (India) Private Ltd, Third Edition 1963, Calcutta (vol. on Tamerlane), p. 13-16.

29. See Gharzai, pp. 59-64.

30. According to Ahmad Ali Kohzad (personal communication), the defacement of the Buddha statues and paintings, and other faces, at Bamiyan in central Afghanistan relates to a Muslim folk belief in Afghanistan the soul resides in the head, directly behind the forehead. Many societies, past and present, have believed the soul or life force of an individual resides in the head.

31. See Robertson, p. 338.

32. See Andreev, 1927; Jettmar, 1961.

33. See Movius, 1953.

34. See Dupree, 1963; 1968.

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